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ABSTRACT

Dropout research reveals that students attending two-year institutions persist at significantly lower rates than students enrolled in four-year schools. In addition, the research indicates that student involvement in campus life at any institution increases the likelihood of persistence. Therefore, a major challenge for student services staff in community colleges is to develop activities and programs that will both broaden the college experience for students and increase the number of students participating in such programs. Encouraging involvement at community colleges is particularly difficult given that many students are enrolled part time, work full time, commute long distances to school, and have family obligations. Following a review of student involvement theory and its applicability to the community college setting, this paper presents a hypothetical case study of efforts undertaken at "Sunshine Community College" to increase student involvement and retention. The case study considers ways that a dean of students may promote student growth and involvement. For example, the dean could: (1) survey registering students to determine the numbers actually involved or interested in becoming more involved, and to assess students' interests and time constraints; (2) conduct a special student orientation to promote student activities, offering each club, organization, and team the opportunity to share information about their group with new students; (3) modify the content of career courses to include explorations of the relationship between college experiences and career plans; (4) create a campus bulletin board to announce events; (5) allocate campus space and computer facilities to student organizations; and (6) implement a student activities fee. (PAA)

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Case Study

Sunshine Community College: Student Activities...To Be Or Not To Be?

Kristina Benacci

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Student activities represent a powerful vehicle for developing student leaders, creating a sense of community and increasing student involvement in campus life at community colleges. According to Alexander Astin (1984), students learn by being involved. In addition, increased involvement can lead to increased retention (Astin, 1985). Thus, the potential impact of student activities at the community college can be paramount in improving the likelihood that a student will complete their degree or desired educational objective. A major challenge for student service staff thus becomes to develop student activities programs which will broaden the college experience for community college students while increasing the number of students who participate and benefit from involvement in programs and activities.

Astin's theory of student involvement evolved from a longitudinal study of college dropouts that sought to identify factors in the college environment that affect a student's persistence in college. Astin found that living on campus was positively related to retention, and that this positive effect occurred in all types of institutions among all types of students...regardless of age, race, sex, or family background (Astin, 1984).

Astin also found that students who join social fraternities, sororities or participate in extra-curricular activities are less likely to drop out of college (Astin, 1984). In addition, Astin found part-time employment on

campus to facilitate retention (Astin, 1984). Astin suggested that because students worked on campus, they spent more time on campus, which increased their chances of coming in contact with students, staff etc. However, as one might expect, Astin reported that retention suffers when a student works off campus at a full-time job. It seems obvious that this student would be spending a considerable amount of time off campus while spending energy on "non-academic" activities rather than campus activities and academics (Astin, 1984).

The most consistent of Astin's findings was that a student's chance of dropping out is substantially greater if attending a two year institution rather than a four year institution (Astin, 1984). Astin stated that the negative effects are noticeable even after the variables of entering student characteristics and lack of residence and work are factored in (Astin, 1984). Astin attributed this largely to the fact that students at community colleges are commuters and a large proportion of community college students attend college on a part-time basis (Astin, 1984). While these factors are not necessarily comprehensive, they do offer some explanation in regard to the substantially larger drop out rate of students at two year institutions.

The research conducted by Astin supports the importance of involvement in enhancing retention. Involvement, however, can be hindered by other factors not mentioned by Astin. The community college, for example, serves an

extremely diverse population of students. This population of students is diverse in age, ethnicity, educational goals (degree, transfer, certificate), interests and needs. In addition, the community college student is often enrolled part-time, works full-time or part-time, and may have family or other obligations which compete for their limited time. It is thus often difficult for student activities personnel to attract students characterized by such a variety of interests and obligations to attend activities.

It has traditionally been difficult to entice students to participate in campus organizations, activities and programs at community colleges. Cohen and Brawer (1982) state that community college personnel directors often consider their activities program a success if only 10% of the students participate. The following are just a few of the factors which may contribute to this phenomena: freshmen and sophomores often lack the leadership experience of university upper classmen; many students work part-time; community college students do not reside on campus; and, only two years are available to develop student leaders (Cohen & Brawer, 1982). While these characteristics may hinder participation, they certainly do not negate the necessity of providing student activities. There are many aspects of the community college environment which can be modified and many suggestions which can serve to strengthen student activities programs and improve participation in student activities.

Case Study: Sunshine Community College

Student Activities...To Be Or Not To Be?

Sunshine Community College is a comprehensive community college with a three-fold mission which centers on general education, career studies and community enrichment. The institution was founded with a strong emphasis on counseling and student development. The past ten to fifteen years have witnessed a decline in the student development emphasis as well as a continual decline in student involvement in campus activities. The new president has expressed a desire to return to the student development empahasis of years gone by which focused on student involvement in activities and overall student participation and success on campus.

Under the administration of the prior Dean of Student Services, student activities stagnated and had practically become obsolete on campus. The newly appointed Dean of Student Services, Dean Good, has been with Sunshine Community College for twenty-three years but has spent the last twenty of those years as Vice-President of Human Resources. Prior to assuming the position in Human Resources, he had participated in the implementation of the original Student Service program at SCC which emphasized the importance of involving students in campus activities. Given Dean Good's prior success in Student Services, the President is confident that the new Dean can improve the student activities program and improve the participation

rate of students in campus activities. The President has just requested that Dean Good develop a plan for improving next years student activities program.

Given this assignment, Dean Good immediately began to investigate the current student activities programs available to students. Upon conducting a brief and rather informal survey, he estimated that less that 10% of the students at SCC had participated or currently participate in any form of campus activities. Despite this disappointingly low percentage of participation, approximately 75% of the students surveyed stated that they would like to partake in student activities if they knew about them in advance. After surveying students, Dean Good began to wonder just what types of activities would interest the diverse student population at SCC and motivate them to take time from their busy schedules to attend activities.

After conducting his survey, Dean Good began to assess the various resources available to the student activities program. Besides himself, there was a staff member who had recently been appointed as Coordinator of Student Activities as well as two faculty members who had voluntarily assumed advisory roles to two student organizations. If he planned on expanding the program, he wasn't sure if he could entice additional faculty members to act as advisors. The current advisors do not receive any recognition or benefits for their efforts. In addition, the faculty all seem so busy, some just don't have any interest in advising, and others

have tried to participate earlier in their careers but have lost interest and motivation due to the lack of organization and lack of student participation which characterized the previous student activities program.

In regard to funding, Dean good was surprised to discover that the institution had never instituted a mandatory student activities fee to support campus activities and programs. Instead, student activities were annually funded out of the general college fund and requests for funds were based on the previous years allocations. This system of funding concerned Dean Good for he realized that it would be difficult to plan and then attempt to implement improvements in next fall's student activities programs when a reliable estimate of financial resources was not available. In addition, he recognized that continual institutional cutbacks would make it even more difficult to justify the allocation of additional funds to a program which not only lacked student participation but lacked the support of many administrators and faculty as well.

Overall, Dean Good is enthusiastic about his new appointment and the challenges he faces in regard to getting students at Sunshine Community College involved in campus activities to maximize their "total" college experience. He just wishes that he had a sure-fire plan to increase student participation in activities to report to the President. What suggestions or modifications of the program should Dean Good include in his report to the President? Does he need additional information? How should he proceed?

Sunshine Community College is an institution which has the potential to increase student growth and retention through an improved student activities program. The administration has stated its desire to facilitate student development and involvement in education through an improved student activities program. While the commitment of the administration is necessary for success, solely emphasizing student activities is not enough. The mission must also permeate and echo from within all segments of the institution. In addition, the CEO must visibly support the efforts of the staff working to improve the student activities program. If administrators, faculty, staff and students are all striving for the same goals, then communication and cooperation will facilitate improvements which can result in student growth and involvement.

To initiate change, the Dean may suggest that the institution further assess and continue to update the needs and interests of its students. This can easily been done as a part of the normal registration process. When students register for classes, they can be asked to complete a short inventory which assess their interests, time restraints, special needs etc. In addition, this survey can serve to measure how many individuals are taking part in campus wide events and activities. This questionnaire will provide administrators with helpful information to better meet student needs while also reinforcing in the student's minds that they matter and that their opinions and needs matter to the college.

In addition, the Dean may want to propose changes in the current orientation program so as to provide another means to improve communication between the students and the college. Because the majority of community college students spend limited amounts of time on campus, it is imperative that they have the necessary information to be active in the activities and organizations that interest them. Such an event could take a number of forms (ie. a summer session, a day session at the beginning of the fall term, incorporate into a class, occasional seminar, retreat, series of lectures, small group sessions with an advisor etc.) depending on the institution's resources. Another way, which is described in more detail, would be to have an orientation "Program Fair".

As a part of this fair, all clubs, organizations, teams etc. could be invited to set up a table (with a hanging banner carrying the name of the group) and have members share information about their group with new students. The various groups can display brochures, pamphlets etc. and can speak to students about their organization. The student activities coordinator may also want to have a table set up for the purpose of solicitating ideas for new organizations or activities. This would be a great time for the coordinator to also have a calender (handouts and poster) advertising the month or the semester's scheduled campus wide activities. Student Services may also want to set up a table displaying all of the services that they have to offer

students. In addition, various musical organizations or theater groups could perform during the Program Fair to create a festive environment.

Another suggestion, which could be proposed as a part of the activities improvement program, would be to expand the curriculum of the current career class to include information in regard to orientation, campus facilities and extra-curricular opportunities on campus. Such modifications in the course would allow students to explore possible connections between college experiences at SCC and their career plans. Such an exploration could serve to increase student involvement by demonstrating its relevance to their lives as well as opening new career possibilities and other options. Students need information and, whether a Program Fair or part of the course curriculum, this information must be disseminated and communication improved.

The sharing of information needs to continue to be a priority beyond orientation if students are going to be aware of the activities and events available to them. SCC could improve communication by utilizing a centrally located (possibly glass covered) bulletin board to advertise upcoming events, meetings and activities. It is important that this board be well maintained and updated by a responsible person (possibly a student who is in charge of campus publicity or the coordinator of student activities). It may also be beneficial to have a separate section of the board for "Next Month's Events and Activities" so that

students can make the necessary arrangements (ie. modify work schedules, provide for child care, etc.) to attend activities. Other means to advertise programs and activities is through promotion of events by faculty, a weekly or monthly SCC newsletter, improved and creative publicity, and advertisement which is disseminated well in advance .

Advertising events and informing individuals of what is available will not get them to attend activities, organizations or programs if they simply aren't interested in what is being offered. It is thus necessary to assess what the students want. While the Dean did conduct a brief survey, a larger survey (like the one suggested to occur at registration) can help provide guidelines as to potential programs or activities which may be well received. For example, departmental or career related programs may be popular with many goal-oriented community college students. Such a suggestion mirrors Graham's (1962) statement that student activities and organizations centering on academics can help students make vocational choices by bringing them together in clubs which host speakers, provide information, take trips etc.(in Cohen, 1982). Participation in such an organization can also provide the student with an activity which will allow for interaction with others pursuing similar academic interests or career paths, provide an activity to enhance their resume as well as provide valuable leadership experience for those who assume leadership

positions. In addition, while recognizing that students have competing interests and obligations, SCC may best benefit by offering diverse activities and programs which are scheduled throughout the semester at various times of the day and week.

Although this is a more extreme suggestion, the Dean may discuss with the President the possibility of having a half hour planning period scheduled into the day. This time could be used by student leaders to plan events, hold meetings or host activities. Students who are not actively involved as members of organizations could use the time to attend activities or programs or could utilize the time to study or meet with faculty.

The Dean must also discuss the necessity for creating some type of meeting place or office space for activity representatives. Student leaders will need some type of physical space from which to operate and run their organizations. Such a space should provide a telephone from which individuals can make phone calls necessary to plan events, a location to receive mail and distribute mail to other organizations, as well as to provide a place (and general supplies) necessary to create advertisements. Access to a computer would also help student leaders. Each organization should also be afforded a locking cabinet so that they are able to store their own supplies, equipment etc. Work study students could also possibly be employed in this office. A student run office, which is supervised by

the coordinator of student activities, has the potential to be a productive and rich learning environment.

It is obvious that many of the suggestions for improving student activities require, or could at least be enhanced by, the allocation of additional funds. Given institutional cutbacks, it does not seem realistic to believe that the general fund will be able to provide adequate or reliable funds for improving student activities. However, a minimal student activities fund could provide Student Services with a more reliable estimate of available funds so that the improved activities programs can have the necessary funding for implementation. In addition, a student activities fund (comprised of student activity fees) could provide the coordinator of student activities with financial "leverage" thus allowing that person to approach academic departments or faculty with potential program or activity ideas which enhance what they are teaching in the classroom. Thus, possibly improving the understanding and cooperation between and among Student Services and the academic departments.

Community Colleges, in general, exert great amounts of time, effort, and money into the planning and implemention of exemplary community programs. These efforts are of great benefit to the community and are an integral part of the mission of the community college. However, community colleges must not forget to look within themselves and pay greater attention to the students who have entered their open doors. Student activities have the benefit of not only

providing for involvement through programs and activities, but also for enhancing interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel, enhancing student leadership potential and developing the sense of community on campus. While changes need to be made in the current structure and function of student activities at SCC, continued assessment, planning and feedback must also occur to modify and add to the changes which will serve to enhance the student's learning, development, involvement and total educational experience at Sunshine Community College.

While these suggestions may satisfy the president in regard to providing some initial direction for change, more planning will need to be done. Such planning should involve students, faculty, staff and administrators. The president has set the direction and now the process for reaching the goals needs to be established. While new issues and variables will surface throughout the process, Dean Good must take action, to improve the "total" college experience for Sunshine Community College students.

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